

Almost Jimi

(a Rockality story by Nils Lofgren)

Let's face it. Hendrix was the man. Head to toe, soul to fingers, he was the greatest rock, blues guitarist in history. When I was a kid in the '60's, we all worshiped the great musicians of our day and the Beatles, Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix, were at the top of the class. In middle America in the '60's, their music was soul food for all, but none of us thought you could do that for a living and it was certainly never looked at as a career option. First time I saw the **Jimi Hendrix Experience** was at the Ambassador Theater in Washington, D.C., 1967. It was an awe inspiring night. I was mesmerized and that night I became possessed with the idea that maybe I needed to be a rock n roll musician, professionally, yeah, like, a career! Jimi, accompanied by Mitch Mitchell and Noel Redding, did that to me with their brilliance and passion, raw talent and guts. I could and probably will go on about Jimi at another time but let me get to this particular story now.

It was roughly, late 1968, I was 17, and **Buddy Miles Express** and the **Terry Reid Group**, both extraordinary bands, were playing a famous nightclub called the Scene in NYC. I think it may have been the first show of the newly formed Buddy Miles Express and they were on fire. I had arrived early with my Telecaster and was unsuccessfully trying to talk my way in. One of my frequent bits was to insist that the guitar player in one of the bands on the evening's bill needed it for the show and along with my lost, sad-sack, teenage demeanor, I had intermittent success. That night the bouncer wasn't buying it but I was rescued by Peter Albin, guitarist for **Janis Joplin's Big Brother and the Holding Company** who vouched for me as a friend and walked me in along with their entire band. I had met Big Brother at previous shows and they remained friendly toward me and my struggles as a rookie rock musician making my way. Anyway, that night I was in to the fabled Scene and it was a magical night. The atmosphere was very electric and loose. At one point I bumped in to Terry Reid, (incredible, young, lean, R&B/ rock singer from England) and offered him my Telecaster to use. He held it and talked with me briefly, kindly declining. At some point during that smoky, heady evening, the great Jimi Hendrix walked in to the Scene and the electricity in the room took a quantum leap. Jimi was in a black bolero outfit with gold trimmings and through the smoke and buzz in the room, he glided majestically to a back corner table with a grace and lightness that would suggest he was being transported by movable bungee cables on ceiling rails. What a beautiful, stunning visual he presented. Yeah, you do sense me drooling. Nevertheless, he was simply, gorgeous! This was early enough in his career, the depression, cynicism and drugs hadn't beaten him down yet. His spirit and persona were still glowing. Anyway, I kept an eye on Jimi at his back table through the smoky room as I took in the magic night of music.

Hours later after both bands had played inspired sets, there was an ongoing, impromptu jam session on the bandstand. Different musicians, some recognizable and some not, were taking turns with various instruments, happily jamming away. It all seemed to be blues based which remains the greatest musical language for freeform, unrehearsed jam sessions. After a while, one of the guitarists put his axe (guitar) on a stand and stepped down from the bandstand. No one walked up to grab it and I started staring at it, wondering if I could simply walk up, grab the guitar and jam along. Keep in mind, I believed I was by far the youngest and least qualified musician in the room but it was really late, the jam had been going on long enough to where it was now, no longer the focus of the entire room, merely a pleasant, side show backdrop to the party hang atmosphere. Could I actually do this? The fire and desperation of those early years started beating up on my insecurities. The lobbying committee in my head was fierce. *"Dude! Didn't you just drop out of high school, run away to Greenwich Village and burn every common sense bridge into young adulthood that existed for your generation in that single crazy, impetuous move? You're in a fabled rock club, filled with what you hope and dream*

may someday be your peers. You love to jam the blues and there's a guitar waiting on stage. You're homeless in NYC, without a gig, and if you don't have the guts to do this, then why the hell are you even here?!" Alright, ok, I get it! The desperation wins and I head off toward the bandstand, quietly step on stage and grabbing the guitar. Now, it's really late, everyone's kind of out of it and I just start playing the blues along with the group on stage. I quickly realize there's a string missing on the guitar I've just started playing. Not good! Well, you're here now man, so deal with it. I start playing around the broken string, trying to find my space in this improv, blues ensemble. I keep at it and no one seems to take much notice one way or the other which is a relief at this point. The number ends, another begins and I carry on, happy to be any musical part of this special night.

Out of the corner of my eye, from a back table in this narrow, smokey club, I see Jimi Hendrix starting to rise out of his seat. Jimi slowly glides up the aisle, through the crowd and I'm watching intently, still amazed he's in the room, maybe heading for the bathroom or another table to visit friends. He keeps coming, seemingly right at me on the bandstand. Now he's really close and still headed right at me. Oh my God! He has walked right up to the lip of the bandstand and is now standing directly in front of me! What the hell?! Does he want me to give him the guitar I'm using and jam? Does he know it's a "right-handed guitar"? (Jimi plays left-handed). Of course he knows that you idiot! He's Jimi friggin' Hendrix! Do I tell him there's a broken string? Jimi's about six feet tall, I'm 5'3." With the low rise of the stage, we're basically eye to eye. I'm frantically avoiding eye contact, not knowing what to expect or do. What a wimp! Suddenly, the greatest guitarist in history speaks.

"Hey man, let me play some bass." I look up and realize Jimi, standing right in front of me and looking slightly to his left, is asking the bass player directly to my right to give him the bass guitar to use. Oh my God! I'm about to jam with Jimi Hendrix on bass and me on a funky, five string guitar. What a trip! What an unimaginable honor! All right, Nils, keep your head and focus on making music with this out of tune, broken string guitar as best you can. You can do this! Just calm the heck down and focus.

I turn my gaze on the bassist to my right to watch this magical moment unfold. He's shaking his long, mane of hair that's covering most of his face as he takes too long to respond to Jimi's request and finally says; "Not now Jimi, I'm groovin'!"

Jimi repeats the request with an extra notch of intent, "Come on man, let me play some bass!," to which the shocking reply is repeated, "Not now Jimi, I'm groovin'!"

Oh my God! He's groovin'?!?! This guy is actually refusing to let Jimi Hendrix play?!! For HIM!! For all of US, with ME!! Do I say something to this mad, misguided stranger about surely one of the poorest decisions of his life? It's really too loud and I'm too insignificant. Do I wield my 5-string tele like a baseball bat and clock him in the head? Way not cool, is my spin, since I don't have the balls or level of violence for it. Anyway, Jimi gives him a disappointed smirk and head shake as, to my horror, he slowly turns around and slowly glides away from the bandstand into the smokey room and crowd that has just been denied an intimate jam session by the mythical Jimi Hendrix.

I am now so sick to my soul and devastated on so many levels, I'm afraid I might be ill. So I remove the guitar, set it on the stand and wander off into the club in a daze of confusion and disillusionment at the meaning of musical life. I cannot bear to look at this bass player or the bandstand again. I don't get it and I can't process it because I'm way too young and inexperienced to make sense of what just happened. My gut tells me not to share what I'm thinking with anyone in the room as I am obviously missing something and would probably just seem like an immature youngster, whining. Anyway, I head outside the club and park myself

across the street, pondering what just happened and keeping an eye on the club entrance. Eventually, Jimi comes out and disappears into a long, black limo with seemingly a dozen people, mostly women and some seedy looking guys. The limo drives off into the night and I dejectedly head for St. Marks place in the Village where I know I'll find other teenagers on the various stairways to sit and be with.

Not armed with any experience to process the strange evening's events, I keep it all to myself. In retrospect, it's now a funny, poignant story, one of many, that reminds me how blessed I am to have been an inspired, musical kid during the heyday of 60's rock n roll and all the great music of that time. By seeking out advice and inspiration from those trailblazers gone before me, I inadvertently and repeatedly found myself in wonderful situations with musicians that taught and counseled me with invaluable experiences. Forty-three years now down that road, as we begin 2012, this continues to be the case and I am grateful and blessed for it. Amen and thanks, Jimi. Words can't describe the inspired musical imprint your life's work continues to blaze in all of us. May God bless and keep your spirit soaring. I'll never forget you and I miss you.

Peace and Believe, Nils